

Rogate, the Sixth Sunday of Easter  
April 27, 2008

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University Lutheran Chapel  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

PRAYER: A GIFT OF CHRIST

John 16:23-30, James 1:22-27, Numbers 21:4-9

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus was speaking to His disciples on the night in which He would be betrayed, a conversation, portions of which we have been hearing over the past few weeks. He was, as I've said before, preparing them not just for His imminent suffering and death, but also for His ascension and for what their life would be like afterward. This Sunday we hear Him teaching them about prayer.

The Lord says to them: "And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." And again He says: "In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God. I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again I leave the world and go to the Father."

Up until this time the disciples did not really have any need to pray to the Father. Christ, the Son of God, who is true God Himself and one with the Father, was with them all the time. When they needed something, were in some distress, had some urgent question or issue, they simply turned to Jesus and asked Him. Jesus, of course, prayed to the Father for them and on their behalf; for Christ was regularly and continually in prayer as we so clearly see from the gospels. But they did not ordinarily pray to the Father directly. It is not that so much that they didn't pray, but rather that their prayers were directed to God who was right there with them in the flesh, rather than to God the Father.

But our Lord tells them that the day is coming when they will not be able to petition Him directly as they had done up until now. He was going to suffer, die, rise again, and then ascend to the right hand of the Father. Now they would not pray to Jesus as they had done while He walked about with them, but to the Father, as Jesus Himself had taught them earlier when He instructed them about prayer and gave them the Our Father. They would now pray to the Father in the name of the Son, and because of their faith in and love of the Son, the Father would hear.

This is one of the reasons that the ascension is so beneficial to all Christians, and was beneficial to the apostles too: Jesus would sit down at the right hand of the Father. There He would continue to intercede for them, and now intercedes for us; for Hebrews tells us: "He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." And St. Paul likewise tells us in Romans 8: "It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." This intercession makes us acceptable to God, who always sees and hears us through our connection to His Son. And so now the prayers of the apostles in Jesus' name could be received directly by God the Father and, for Christ's sake, would be heard and answered by Him as well.

Now all of this pertains to us as well and to all true Christians. In Baptism we have been clothed with Christ who now covers our sinfulness like a garment. We have, as Revelation says, washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. And now by His grace we are clothed not with sin, but with His righteousness. And now we are called sons of God through Him as well. Living in faith from baptism, trusting in His Word and believing, loving Him as our dearest brother, savior and Lord, we too have access to the ear of God the Father and the right to call for His blessing.

Prayer, simply put, is part and parcel of the Christian life of faith. Prayer is an act of faith and of worship. And it is something God wants us to do. In fact, He commands us to call upon His name and pray to Him: "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving," St. Paul tells us (Colossians 4:2). And again he says: "I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men..." (I Timothy 2:1). And yet again, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," (I Thessalonians 5:16-18). The Lord says in Psalm 50: "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." And in numerous other places as well we are exhorted and taught to pray to God.

Not only does God command that we pray to Him, but He promises to hear our prayers and answer them. Again, our Lord said today: "Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you... Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." St. John explains (I John 5:14-15) that this means praying out of faith, according to the will of God as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures: "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him." So when we pray as Christians, as those who are "in the name of Jesus", whose lives are anchored in baptism and lived in faith, whose petitions are guided by God's Word and will, then our prayers will certainly not only be heard, but granted.

And if that were not enough to induce us to pray, our Lord even gives us the words to pray. First He gives us the Lord's Prayer or Our Father. This is to be both our prayer in and of itself, and also a model from which other prayers may flow. Everything for which a Christian ought to be praying is included in it in a general and comprehensive way, as Luther's explanations of it in the Small Catechism show us, and as the catechism hymn we just sang teaches us. In addition to the Lord's prayer, we have the entire Psalter, which is really a prayer book that touches the most profound needs of a human being, and all of the struggles of the heart. And if that were not enough, we have the rest of the Scriptures, which instruct us in God's will and doings and inform and help launch our praying. Here God gives us a rich treasure house from which to pray: words that give us faith; words that we know are acceptable and pleasing to Him, so that our prayers may be so also.

So basically, God commands that we pray, He promises to hear our prayers, and He even gives us the words to pray. All that is left for us is to open our mouths and do it. So why do we have such a hard time actually doing it?

Our failure here must be attributed to our sinfulness, and to the way our enemies take advantage of our weaknesses. Our flesh resists praying through simple laziness. Prayer takes some effort on our part after all. We have to think about prayer and make time to do it. Sometimes prayer can feel monotonous or tedious when we are not "into it". Othertimes it is uncomfortable to pray. The flesh does not like to approach God and admit its needs and its weakness, let alone its failures. Yes it is just easier to ignore the obligation to pray altogether. It's easier to be lazy about it.

The devil, of course, hates it when we pray. And so he uses our sinfulness to his advantage to dissuade us from doing so. If we have been lazy or apathetic he brings that sin to mind and tells us “don’t bother now to pray, you’ve had your chances all along and didn’t take advantage of them. You’ve ignored God for some time, perhaps He will now ignore you!” Not only that, but He tries to make us aware of other sins that we have committed, and then tells us that we are unworthy to approach God at all. Certainly He will not hear you, for you are not in a state of purity. Your faith is weak and your life is an embarrassment to Him. He must surely turn His ear away from you altogether.

And the world rushes in to keep us busy so that we fail to take time to pray. It occupies with so many different things and with such demanding situations, that we sometimes just forget to pray, even though it may be the one thing we really need to do to survive in this world.

We must not let these ancient enemies stand in our way, however. Prayer is far too important a part of the Christian life to put aside. Moreover, Christ our Lord has answered these enemies and all of their attempts to keep us from praying. Jesus, who has forgiven all of our sins and declared us righteous before God, has thereby made it so that our sins should be no impediment to our praying. The Father hears us for Christ’s sake, not for our own sake. It is not our goodness or our piety that opens the way for our prayers to ascend to Him. Our prayers depend on the merits of Christ and faith in Him. And He continually intercedes for us.

Look, for example, at the people of Israel in today’s Old Testament lesson. They were the chosen nation, yet their sins against God were so great that He sent poisonous snakes to bite and kill them. He had saved them out of Egypt, had provided them water in the desert, and manna, angels’ food, from heaven. And yet they complained and said: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.” But when the snakes come, they at once pray to Moses to intercede for them. And God hears their prayers (through Moses’ prayer on their behalf). He hears and has mercy on them, giving them the bronze serpent, a means to counteract the bite of the poisonous serpents and to live. Now God has given to us Christ Jesus, His only begotten Son. He has been lifted up for us, and through Him we live, and our prayers are heard. And so you can say to the devil. You be quiet and let me pray. I know that I am a sinner. God will hear me anyway, in spite of my sins, for Christ’s sake.

Jesus has answered the laziness of our flesh too. He has made prayer easy and light for us by giving us the Lord’s Prayer. If we feel too overwhelmed or too tired to prayer, we can simply repeat this prayer that we have been taught and know that it is pleasing to God. If this becomes mundane or monotonous to us, then we have the Psalter and the rest of the Scriptures from which to pray. Moreover He gives us His Church as a schoolhouse of prayer, where we hear the Lord’s Word and it becomes our own through teaching and repetition. He also gives us the ancient patterns of prayer through the Church to help us establish a routine of morning and evening prayer, and of prayer at meal times, and if we are willing at other times too.

Our Lord has also answered the protests of our world. You see prayer is one of the gifts of Christ that is just as easily enjoyed outside of church as in it. You can pray anywhere at any time. Out loud or silently, it really doesn’t matter that much. Verbal prayers are better, to be sure, as they help focus the mind on praying properly and coherently, but when you can’t pray out loud, a silent prayer will suffice just as well. God hears either way. And so no matter how busy or stressful life in this world gets, you can always pray in the midst of it.

And it is so important that you actually do pray. James exhorts us today to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only”. And while he is speaking about works of love and care to our neighbors, this certainly also includes prayer. We are not just to hear about prayer, and then go away and not be in prayer. We are to actually put this gift to use, for ourselves, on behalf of others, and for the whole Church too. For God hears and answers the prayers of the faithful. And so in praying you are actually helping the one whom you are praying for, though you may not realize it or see the evidence. The Lord has, after all, promised that whatever you ask from faith in the name of His Son, it will be granted to you.

And this you can know is true. For Christ who died is risen and has ascended to the right hand of the Father. There He intercedes for us, crying out for us and with us. And the Father has promised to hear our prayers for His sake, who is ever present with Him in honor and might, in glory and majesty, who with the Holy Spirit, are one God now and forever. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧